

External Reviewer Report
Department of Economics, San Francisco State University
November 2018

Review team members:
Aaron Hegde, Professor and Chair of Economics, CSU Bakersfield
Guillermo Herrera, Professor of Economics, Bowdoin College

The review team visited SFSU October 23-24, 2018. In addition to the self-study provided by the department and information provided by the administration (e.g., CoB annual report, etc.), the team met with university and College of Business (henceforth “CoB”) administrators; with department faculty in various overlapping subsets; with students from both the B.A. and the M.A. programs; and with departmental staff. Our goal was to understand the current state of the department -- including both successes and challenges -- and to arrive at a set of actionable recommendations.

The SFSU Economics Department consists of a group of highly motivated scholar - educators going through a time of transition. Between administrative changes and new faculty members joining the program, this is an exciting but sensitive juncture in the evolution of the department. It is important for the department, the College of Business, and the administration to have a coherent vision for the immediate future as well as the next 5-10 years.

Program Planning:

The department’s recent integration into the CoB provides many opportunities and some administrative efficiencies. But this change has clearly also presented the department with a number of challenges. These challenges are not surprising, but the department, the rest of the CoB, and the university need to be proactive in addressing them.

As is generally the practice with economics departments housed in business schools, the department is being included in the AACSB current accreditation cycle. This inclusion will help to further integrate the department into the CoB.

Based on feedback from employers, much of the economics discipline is shifting towards providing graduates with more quantitative and analytical skills. The department may want to consider surveying local employers to confirm a similar trend in the area. Incorporating the resulting feedback, along with a vigorous assessment program, should inform any needed curricular changes to keep the program relevant.

Student Learning and Achievement:

Students at SFSU come from a highly heterogeneous set of backgrounds and educational contexts. Many are first-generation college students, and many are “non-traditional,” in that they attend school part time because they have to work or fulfill other responsibilities. And cutting across these heterogeneities, students have different preparation levels, strengths and challenges. This variation in ability, preparation level, and perspective makes teaching more difficult; the curriculum must be tailored to be relevant, engaging, accessible, and challenging for all students. But in addition to the challenges, teaching such a student body is highly gratifying; the faculty we met conveyed a particularly strong sense of commitment to this challenge, and they appreciate the markedly positive impact their teaching can have on student outcomes.

The students we met with (three undergraduates and three master’s students) were highly articulate and candid in their views of the department. They were positive about the quality of instruction they had received and the opportunities they would have going forward. But these students also suggested they could have benefited (or that future students would benefit) from better communication about the advantages of an economics major and how to parlay this training into future professional or academic success. We particularly felt that some improved information regarding the master’s program would go a long way in attracting and retaining these students.

In general, students have close and positive relationships with the Economics faculty. Class sizes -- in particular those beyond the introductory, or “principles,” classes (Econ 101 and 102) -- are small enough for pedagogical innovations and for faculty to get to know their students. In addition to the critical thinking skills that one would hope would be part of any college-level economics training, the SFSU students who spoke with the review team were positive about the skills they receive as part of their training as economics majors: in particular quantitative empirical tools and some basic coding skills (in R, Stata, Python, and SQL), a direction in which the discipline is headed.

The Curriculum:

An economics department plays a vital role in a university and in a College of Business; it is essential to identify the comparative advantages of the department in educating a student body with a diverse set of interests and strengths. The department should regularly self-assess (on a departmental level as well as a course-by-course basis): who comes to SFSU to study economics? What do they get out of it? And how can we help this particular population of students succeed? In general we found the faculty to be thoughtful and already engaged in answering these questions, and interested in fostering success as well as possible given the constraints they face.

Employers place great value on the quantitative empirical, analytical, and mathematical training required of an economics major, as well as the critical thinking skills the discipline requires. It is important that current and prospective students know that the professional opportunities available to SFSU economics majors extend significantly beyond the traditionally perceived confines of the discipline (e.g., banking, finance, economic consulting). As seen with graduates of similar institutions, undergraduate economics majors with subsidiary concentrations in other areas of CoB curriculum (e.g., accounting; finance) will fare especially well in business employment – often better than those with a narrower business training. Sister institution economics departments (such as CSU Bakersfield) have successfully integrated themselves in to their respective colleges of business by offering business concentrations. In addition to creating synergy, this has also helped grow the economics major. Hence, a broad-based economics training such as that provided by the SFSU Economics department, supplemented with some technical or vocational skills, will be appealing to prospective employers.

The department's role in the SFSU curriculum transcends departmental boundaries: the introductory courses satisfy Lower Division General Education requirements for students across the curriculum, while two courses (Econ 540 and 612) are included in the Upper Division General Education requirements. The introductory courses also service the business major, as lower division requirements for the major.

Graduate Education in Economics

The SFSU Economics department currently offers a single master's degree, an MA in Economics. This program has declined in enrollment over the past several years, from a high of 49 (2013-14) to a low of 12 (2017-18); one of the challenges for the department is to understand these enrollment trends -- in particular, whether they are driven with broader national trends across institutions and/or whether they result from student perceptions and experiences within the department. In the latter case, the department should strive to counteract these trends -- enrolling and retaining more students at the masters level so as to more fully utilize faculty resources devoted to this program. In their self-study and during conversations, the department identified the ending of a joint MA program with two Chinese universities as the reason for the precipitous drop in graduate enrollments.

Lower enrollments in the MA program may also be driven by the availability of financial aid. The University is piloting a program that would provide tuition waivers to some graduate students. The department has been encouraged to explore this possibility for its MA program.

It was made clear to the reviewers -- through our discussions with faculty as well as with current graduate students -- that the MA program currently serves two largely distinct constituents (although some may transition from one group to the other): (a) those who plan to continue on from the MA to PhD-level training in economics or a closely related field at a different institution; and (b) those who wish to acquire training and an academic credential that will

directly further their professional careers in the private or public sector. These two groups of students have different abilities, interests, and time horizons. As a result they take different electives within the program; the department should understand the relative demands of these two groups in order to refine their course offerings (either by offering different courses or by refining current offerings to address the needs of both groups).

The MA currently offered by the economics department is distinct from the others offered by the CoB (i.e., MBA, MBA for Biotech, MS Business Analytics, and MS Accountancy); the nature of the economics degree and its value should be clearly communicated to faculty and prospective students alike. The program has successfully placed graduates within the public policy sector. Our discussions with students indicated that there is a deficiency in career resources, especially for graduate students. A retooling of the website to include such resources would bridge this gap, as would a more consistent series of presentations/panels led by faculty, students, and/or alumni.

Part of the department's improved communication about its graduate program should include a reconfiguration of the economics masters degree, and perhaps a new name that highlights its strengths. The external reviewers arrived at the idea of this "re-branding" of the master's program independently, and were very pleased to hear that discussion of such a change was already well underway in the department. In particular, the reviewers feel that changing the "MA in Economics" to a "MS in Quantitative Economics" or "MS in Quantitative Economics and Policy Analysis" would go a long way to highlighting the actual strengths of the program. Such a change would bolster the perceived value of this program to prospective and current students, to CoB colleagues, and to the university as a whole. While some curricular changes should be made to coincide with this reformulation of the economics graduate program, the current master's curriculum already possesses notable strengths in the areas implied by these potential new titles.

Furthering the department's integration within the CoB would be to offer some graduate courses at the college's downtown branch. This may also help with recruiting more students in to the program.

Undergraduate Education

At the undergraduate level, the department serves its own majors – approximately 300 in total at any given time. But it also plays a vital role in the education of SFSU students as a whole (a role including, but not limited to, satisfying "Area D" of the General Education requirements) and in particular undergraduate students in the college of business. For example, the department teaches 12-14 sections of Econ 101 (Introduction to Microeconomics), a large (80-130 student) course, each year; almost 4000 students have taken this course over the last three years. Of the students who enroll in Econ 101, relatively few are economics majors; the majority are either majors in the CoB, or take the course to fulfill GenEd requirements.

Currently, half of the introductory course sections -- in particular most sections of Econ 102, Introduction to Macroeconomic Analysis -- are taught by part-time instructors with less experience in the field and far less pedagogical training than the full-time faculty. As a result, the quality of instruction in these courses is highly variable; that is, there is inconsistency in the efficacy of delivering this foundational part of the curriculum to the heterogeneous audience discussed above. We hypothesize that this variable introductory experience is substantially responsible for the high D/F/W rates observed in some of these courses and, subsequently, to the decline in graduation rates from the department; students either get discouraged by a poor outcome and do not persevere with their degree, or they are required to retake courses, slowing progress toward graduation. We recommend that additional resources be allocated to this department so that these important and oversubscribed courses be taught by an experienced faculty member with demonstrated excellence in teaching. This could be in the form of a new senior lecturer with expertise in teaching principles courses, or a new tenure-track line that would allow the current tenure-track faculty to rotate more frequently into these courses.

Introductory courses are not easy to teach well, and are critical to a department's mission: they introduce prospective students to the discipline and assist in recruiting new students to the major; they provide the basics of economic literacy that will enrich the education of students across the university; and they teach a fundamental set of quantitative modeling and critical thinking skills. It is vital that these courses receive resources commensurate with their importance.

We also feel it would be helpful for the faculty to have a regular set of brown-bag discussions about teaching: about pedagogical techniques, particular challenges in the classroom, the use of technology, grading rubrics, etc. This would serve to homogenize departmental norms and expectations across instructors.

Faculty:

Economics faculty are collegial and cooperative (with each other as well as with the external reviewers). They are enthusiastic about their department and passionate about delivering a high-level curriculum. We witnessed a very positive relationship between faculty and students – one that suggested accessibility, advocacy, and a willingness to tailor teaching and scholarship to include and empower students. Literature indicates that students learn best when engaged in research with their faculty. Given the quantitative skills of the average economics student, there are ample opportunities to involve students in faculty research.

While faculty are engaged in scholarship in most of the main fields of economics, the main strengths of the department seem to be in quantitative empirical training (econometrics) and applied policy analysis. Recent departures from the faculty pose some challenges for the public policy specialty, and it is important for the department and the institution to bolster the strengths through faculty replacement and potentially additional hires.

Resources:

There are some curricular and pedagogical initiatives that the department can and should undertake within their existing context, as detailed below. But there are instances where modest additional resources from the university could make a dramatic difference in the efficacy of the department; these additional resources include additional compensation to incentivize faculty involvement in initiatives that push them beyond their standard workload; funding for co-curricular events that would enhance both the student experience and faculty scholarship; additional support staff to facilitate high-impact service learning and to provide more effective communication regarding the department's activities and curriculum; and additional full-time faculty to increase course offerings and allow the existing instruction to be done at a higher level.

The University provides faculty with a fairly generous annual travel fund to support conference travel, but the use of these funds is unnecessarily constrained; a relaxation of these constraints would enhance the professional engagement and productivity of the faculty -- especially junior faculty. In particular, engagement would be enhanced by at least partial compensation for travel to conferences even when a faculty member is not presenting; and some coverage of travel to meet with collaborators would facilitate faculty engagement across institutions. This funding is especially important for junior faculty in the early stages of establishing their research agenda; the department is small and does not have much overlap or potential for collaboration within subfields of the discipline. These suggested changes do not necessarily require additional financial resources, but rather an increased fungibility or flexibility in the way in which the annual research stipend can be used.

The graduate director has not been compensated for her time overseeing the MA program. Whether through reassigned time or a stipend, the University needs to make this minimal investment in the department's efforts to revitalize the MA program. Synergies with the CoB in marketing the program also seem to be lacking. The outreach office of the CoB should include the MA program in its graduate programs marketing portfolio. In addition to further integrating the Economics Department within the CoB, these efforts will help invigorate the graduate program.

There is a general sense among the department that there are large wage gaps between economics faculty and their business colleagues. While salary increases may not be feasible under the CBA, the CoB Dean or the Provost's Office should consider offering a summer research stipend to the department faculty. In addition to helping the faculty maintain their SA status, with regards to AACSB accreditation, it may alleviate the need for some faculty -- given the high cost of living in the Bay Area -- to teach summer classes. This would allow them to more effectively use their summer research time.

Recommendations:

In summary, we recommend that the following actions be taken at the department, college (CoB), and university levels:

Department

1. Rebrand the MA in Economics to an MS in Quantitative Economics or an MS in Quantitative Economics and Policy Analysis.
2. Conduct a survey of local employers regarding trends in hiring needs.
3. Improve communication, including retooling website, about the advantages of an economics major and how to parlay this training into future professional or academic success, especially with a graduate degree.
4. Refine course offerings to meet the needs of the two distinct groups of graduate students within the MA program - the terminal degree students and those pursuing PhDs
5. Apply for a tuition waiver program to help lower cost of attending graduate program.
6. Establish a regular set of brown-bag discussions about teaching: about pedagogical techniques, particular challenges in the classroom, the use of technology, grading rubrics, etc. to serve to homogenize departmental norms and expectations across instructors.

College:

7. Create additional support for large introductory courses (i.e., Econ 101, 102) - teaching assistants, mentors, etc.
8. Offer graduate courses at CoB's downtown branch to help recruit and retain more graduate students.
9. Relax restrictions on use of funds allocated to the professional engagement and productivity of the faculty -- especially junior faculty.
10. Task the CoB Outreach Office with marketing the economics graduate program.
11. Offer summer research stipends to department faculty.

University

12. Allocate additional resources for a new tenure-track line that would allow the current tenure-track faculty to rotate more frequently into introductory courses.

13. Fund co-curricular events that enhance student experience and faculty scholarship; additional support staff to facilitate high-impact service learning and to provide more effective communication regarding the department's activities and curriculum.
14. Support either reassigned time or a stipend for a graduate director to oversee the MA program.